

## Macalester International

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Volume 3 *Literature, the Creative Imagination, and  
Globalization*

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Article 7

Spring 5-31-1996

# The Limits of the Artistic Imagination, and the Secular Intellectual

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### Recommended Citation

Said, Edward W. (1996) "The Limits of the Artistic Imagination, and the Secular Intellectual," *Macalester International*: Vol. 3, Article 7.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol3/iss1/7>

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# THE LIMITS OF THE ARTISTIC IMAGINATION, AND THE SECULAR INTELLECTUAL

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Edward W. Said

Poetry is one of the things we do to our  
ignorance; criticism makes us conscious of  
what we have done, and sometimes makes us  
conscious of what can be done next, or done  
again.

R. P. Blackmur<sup>1</sup>

## I. Literary Worlds

In her fine new book, *Writing and Being*, Nadine Gordimer argues that the modern writer uses fiction to enact life, to explore worlds that are concealed in the turmoil of everyday reality, to investigate politics that are otherwise forbidden or ignored. For her, writers like Naguib Mahfouz, Chinua Achebe, and Amos Oz are witnesses to a struggle for truth and freedom, their writings testimonial to a quest, she says, “in the alternative world by alternative writers.” What they look for is “the Home that is truth, undefined by walls, by borders, by regimes.”<sup>2</sup> Although we might want to dispute the choice of writers — is Amos Oz, or even Mahfouz, as much an “alternative” writer as she claims? — and might also want to question whether what appears like an antinationalist argument in their work is not in fact a deeper form of nationalism, it would be hard to disagree with Gordimer’s suggestion that imaginative writers really do reach out beyond the confines of their time and place to a more spacious region not hemmed in by conventional loyalties, traditions, and regimes. Even if they do not actually provide readers with a map of that utopian space, there is the process of striving itself, which is embodied in their fiction or poetry or drama, whose salutary effect is both liberating and exploratory.

I don't mean to be critical of Gordimer's thesis when I say that it is a profoundly romantic one, echoing a large number of declarations and avowals across the ages, East, West, North, and South, in which the poet is described as a vatic figure, proclaiming unseen or unheard truths, defying mundane authority as well as priestly power, venturing where angels have feared to tread. Here is Mary Shelley writing in 1821:

It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are perhaps the most seriously astonished at its manifestations; for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age. Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadow which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously there are differences between this impassioned, visionary statement of the poets' capacities and Gordimer's much more sober and analytic view of the literary artist. She justly believes that the writer is in fact deeply implicated in his or her society and cannot remain the unmoved mover. But both Gordimer and Shelley ascribe to the artistic imagination a greater capacity for seeing and understanding than is given to the ordinary citizen, and both also propose that we listen to the poet or novelist as someone who has moved beyond the boundaries of quotidian interests.

Even Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, who bristles with refusals and rejections, is not so far from Gordimer. One hundred years after Shelley, Joyce has Dedalus say,

I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church; and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, cunning.<sup>4</sup>

This is a relatively circumscribed declaration of principles; it neither takes on the whole world's problems nor attempts to legislate for all mankind. But it gives privilege and even sanctity to the artist while also locating in the artist's vocation both freedom and power of extraordinary expression. Joyce will later mock Stephen for his prissiness and, more essentially, for his inability to produce much in the way of writing. But there has remained in later readers (like Gordimer) something of Joyce's admiration for the artistic imagination, at least in its rejectionist, intransigent mode.

What has changed since Shelley and Joyce spoke mainly about the European artist is the emergence for the first time of an international literary marketplace in which — again for the first time—a highly selective group of authors from Latin America, the Indian Subcontinent, the Far East, parts of Africa, Australia, and the Caribbean are translated, published, and circulated on a mass scale out of great commercial centers like London, Paris, and New York. This is one of the main features of the postcolonial world, this massive absorption of formerly foreign, exotic, and, in some respects, unhoused writers into an enormous circulation system dominated by gigantic publishing houses and conglomerates, media empires, and consumer tastes that can hardly be said to provide authors with a neutral, or at least open, reception. True, there has appeared an important Anglophone and Francophone literature written by individuals neither French nor English, expressing ideas, devising forms, inventing worlds that are extraordinarily original, but these have become part of the global system whose core is in the North, so to speak; whatever may have begun as a local invention — García Márquez's Macondo, Rushdie's Bombay, or even Mahfouz's Cairo<sup>5</sup> — has been transformed into something cosmopolitan and international, in both the good and bad senses of those words.

I do not think, therefore, it is an exaggeration to speak of the globalization of literature. Of course, Colombians and Mexicans are García Márquez's first readers, and, of course, in one sense he is still a vital local presence in Latin America, read on mountain buses by ordinary people in Peru, for example, but the power of his presence is an international one consolidated by the Nobel Prize and backed by corporations like Random

House, institutions that are not bound by national barriers. This is true of a relatively small number of writers—Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Michael Ondaantje, Seamus Heaney, Ben Jelloun, Vikram Seth, Derek Walcott, and Wole Soyinka, among several others—all of whom have become staples of any international reading list of crucial contemporary artistic sensibilities. I intend no disparagement at all of these quite first-rate artists, most of whom I respect and care for very deeply. But what I am trying to point to is a dialectic other than the one indicated by Gordimer (who is certainly a major figure on the international artistic landscape), one in which writer and international market interact to produce recognizable, admired, much-circulated figures who belong, so to speak, to world literature. We still know very little about what effect this interaction has on the writer as he or she writes, but it is arguably true that knowing that one's audience is no longer only someone in Bogotá or Rabat inflects even sentences, and certainly structures, in an unmistakable way. As a great supporter of Salman Rushdie's gifts and accomplishments, I think it is still possible to say that had he not had a London or New York audience in mind when he wrote *The Satanic Verses*<sup>6</sup> and had he had only a community of Indian Muslims to think about, the novel would have been a very different book and its clamorous reception considerably less vociferous.

Even if we do not wish to make the leap from local to international so abruptly, there is still the realization that many authors—not just novelists—face, as their work develops, new audiences through immediate translation and immediate global circulation: Iranian clerics reading a novel in English published in London and New York, for example. For reasons that are too tedious and perhaps well known for me to go into here, I have had to deal with this prismatic reality on a smaller scale in my work in the years since *Orientalism* was published in 1978.<sup>7</sup> What I had intended as a critique of the role of power in forming European and American knowledge has been read in the Islamic world both understandably and quite mistakenly as a defense of Islam, the East, and oppressed people. Subsequently, I have had to think carefully about what I say as it might be construed, say, in Istanbul or Cairo or Teheran, and this obviously bears, albeit imperceptibly, on what I say and how I say it. This is especially

true in times of intolerance and unnaturally inflamed religious and ideological passions. For writers whose work has now gathered the kind of international prestige that can turn into films, innumerable articles, television interviews, and celebrity status, its local, immediate, and existential provenance can seem like a very irrelevant, if not entirely forgotten, matter.

What we read here in the United States is of course very different from what people in Jakarta, Lagos, or Kingston, Jamaica, read. It is not only that the powerful absorptive capacities of the media take in a great deal more material, but that what *we* think about a writer or artistic sensibility has much more weight than what that author's original, local audience thinks. In much of the non-European world, there can be an ugly tension between internationally celebrated writers and those who have not made it in the Eurocentric sphere that determines such things as lucrative book contracts, serialization, book clubs, and film and TV adaptations. While most of us assume that such tension essentially derives from resentment on the part of lesser writers who have not "made it," they do, in fact, often have a point: for who is to say, to take the example of Naguib Mahfouz, that he is a better witness to Egypt, or a finer stylist, than, say, Yusif Idriss, a formidably gifted fiction writer and dramatist who, until Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1988, was at least as well known and as highly regarded in Egypt and the Arab-speaking world?

The politics of international cultural exchange are, in fact, nowhere better illustrated than in the case of Arabic. In 1990, just as the Gulf Crisis had exploded, I wrote an article for the *Nation* in which I lamented the appalling discrepancy between the West's knowledge of Latin American, African, and Caribbean literature and its knowledge of Arabic literature.<sup>8</sup> What was so irritating, I said, was that it was not a matter of Arabic works not being available in translation, but rather of attention in the press and among publishers and readers. For the first time in dozens of years, many Arabic writers from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Palestine, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia were getting their work translated into English and, even more systematically, into French. Yet you would have no way of knowing this, since the books were never reviewed in the *New York Times*, the weekly magazines, or even the literary quarter-

lies. It was as if — for whatever reason — Arabic literature connoted trouble and was therefore relegated to silence and oblivion as far as American readers were concerned. Paradoxically, when one writer “makes it big,” as Mahfouz did, that further distorts the picture: Mahfouz came to represent “The Arab Writer,” even though in many ways the stories of Zakaria Tamer, for instance, a totally untranslated Syrian short story writer, may in effect be more telling, more significant, and more representative of the Arab world’s present situation than Mahfouz’s fictions.

The point of this sociology is to emphasize the way in which such phrases and concepts as “the artistic imagination” or even “literature” have to be passed through several filters, modifying perspectives, and translations before they can be used with any kind of accuracy. If we are to talk about the artistic imagination or literature as something more than documentary evidence, we must deal with the facts of its reception, its distribution, and its effect from something other than the writer’s perspective, which is likely to be made up of very different and even warring aesthetic, as well as personal and social, components. So one important question is to what extent the artistic imagination should reflect, as opposed to resist and refuse, the writer’s local situation. Another question is whether the artistic imagination, for all its powers and persuasions, can or should on its own deal with the shifting images, markets, appetites, and definitions provided by today’s international scene. Is there refuge or solace to be taken in the particular house, or *habitus*, of the writer’s locale, or has that too been dissolved in the general drift of global, internationalized markets that seek out the special, the exotic, and the rare and make them acceptable, perhaps even domesticated?

In most societies the artist, whether as poet, novelist, dramatist, painter, musician, storyteller, or dancer, is often believed to be exempt from the ordinary constraints of citizenship. “Oh, he or she is an artist or poet” is a phrase often used to excuse someone like Ezra Pound, for instance, for the most appalling human foibles. And indeed, in many ways one should be able to argue, say, that Wagner’s music as a whole far outweighs not just the consequences of his work in Germany, but even his own vile pronouncements as an anti-Semite, racist, and xenophobe. An artist’s work, however, is very different from an artist’s political

behavior, although it would be extremely difficult to separate the two at some level. They obviously overlap in ways that make the need for what I'd like to call the critical consciousness a very significant one. Precisely because the artistic imagination is really privileged by virtue not just of social authority but also because it is capable of unique vision, articulation, and invention, it needs the support of a social and political awareness that guides the artist's presence in the world, which constitutes his or her worldliness. I have no intention of reducing the aesthetic to crude, politically correct messages; on the contrary, I want to assert the independence of the aesthetic, its relative social autonomy. But what I do want to insist on is the insufficiency of the artistic imagination when it comes to dealing *directly* and *analytically* with politics, society, and even history. There, I think, we need the worldliness of the secular intellectual.

## II. Complements of the Intellectual

Let me begin with an example of the insufficiency I have been referring to, tying it the general point I want to make — that on its own, the artistic imagination needs the support, if not the actual energies, of the intellectual to sustain itself in a world that is as full of traps and internationalized, globalized instabilities and inauthenticities as this one. Several years ago the remarkable J. M. Coetzee, a South African writer of genuine distinction and stature, was invited from Capetown to go to Israel to receive the annual Jerusalem Prize. Although he was himself not an overtly political writer like André Brink, Nadine Gordimer, or Bessie Head, Coetzee's parables — *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K*, to name two of his best-known works<sup>9</sup> — seemed in an extremely interesting way to allude to the South African apartheid mentality, its imbalances, its social and political deformations, and, above all, its spiritual malaise. He arrived in Jerusalem to receive the prize in the very thick of the *Intifada*; perhaps he hadn't been aware of its happening, but he certainly was aware that Israel had been in colonial occupation of the Palestinian territories and the Palestinian people for more than twenty years. Moreover, Nelson Mandela (who was still in prison at the time), as well as the ANC and most of the other antiapartheid groups, had on numerous occasions



expressed both support for the Palestinians and condemnation of Israeli practices, which, as so many had remarked, bore a strong resemblance to South African apartheid. Despite this, Coetzee gave a speech, subsequently published in a collection of his essays called *Doubling the Point*,<sup>10</sup> that eloquently made reference to the Holocaust and to the travails of apartheid without once mentioning the existence less than a mile from where he stood of a Palestinian “problem.” To me and to many other of Coetzee’s numerous Palestinian friends and admirers, the omission was shocking.

Now, precisely because I do not think we should expect the artistic imagination to be able to do or say anything, we need the services of the secular intellectual as a corrective standard for what the artistic imagination cannot do. One reason for the insufficiency is that most artists write or perform from, as well as for, their local audiences first, and only secondarily for the global market, which may or may not accept their views exactly because their political and intellectual commitments are inconvenient, embarrassing, or too severe. Jean Genet is today read as a playwright with a scandalously inventive, even violent, imagination, oblivious of social conventions and traditions; yet very few of his readers are prepared to take on his views about the Black Panthers or the Palestinians with the same degree of interest, just because those views remain as unaccommodated, as socially difficult as ever. For that reason much of Genet’s political writing remains untranslated or is not easily available. The same may be true of Juan Goytisolo, a courageous explorer of socially problematic terrain who is also a brilliant novelist and essayist. Part of what makes the Rushdie case so complex is that after *The Satanic Verses*, it was the very constituency he had long written for and defended as pamphleteer and essayist in England—Muslim immigrants from the subcontinent—that led the fight against him and his book.

Or take the case of V. S. Naipaul, a gifted and disturbing writer who has accompanied his fiction with a dozen books of nonfiction, most of them earning him the reputation in the formerly colonized world of being an enemy of that world and its people. *Among the Believers*, written a decade ago, is (in my opinion) a lamentable book about Islam in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, and while a certain amount of what he says has

some truth to it, the portrait of the whole that he presents is shot through with the worst prejudices and ignorant mythologizing of "Islam" — surely an almost unusable term these days — that one can encounter.<sup>11</sup> Read alongside, let us say, *A Bend in the River*, an extremely skillful novel that contains flashes of considerable brilliance, Naipaul's Islamic book seems derived from the same imaginative core: a virulent distrust of mass movements among people colonized and oppressed for years by Western powers, and now trying (often comically and desperately) both to make up for the past and to set a new course for the future.<sup>12</sup> Naipaul is not only unmoved by this, he actively detests it, whether it appears in an East African Black or Indian, or in a Pakistani or Iranian shopkeeper.

But it is certainly the case, however, that a novelist is not meant to be an analytic thinker, even though in his nonfiction Naipaul does present as well as argue his views about the Caribbean or India systematically and with great thoroughness. Reading Naipaul, I have always regretted the absence in his work about the Third World of any compassion or historical understanding, especially of the kind that is premised on a non-Eurocentric notion of history and values. The great authority and prestige of a celebrated artist is, in Naipaul's case, unfairly enlisted on the side of the strong and powerful, not the weak and disadvantaged. What Naipaul can do in his work is to give space to the unheard voices of this world, but because he is actively opposed to what they stand for, his representations of them, skillfully embedded in fiction of a very polished kind, can do them even more damage than their silence. I recall that when *A Bend in the River* appeared in 1979, it got an adulatory front-page review in the *Sunday New York Times Book Review* by Irving Howe, plus a reverential portrait of the man (on the same front page) by Elizabeth Hardwick.<sup>13</sup> Both stressed the opinion that here at last was an honest opinion of the Third World done by someone who, after all, was *of* that world and therefore knew what he was talking about. Thus was the artistic imagination coopted into ideological service. That the *New York Times* had never been exactly supportive of Third World leaders and scarcely needed the boost given it by Naipaul, Howe, and Hardwick was never mentioned.

It would be folly to deny, however, that other novelists — Anita Desai, Rushdie, Mahfouz, De Kenzaburo, Nadine Gordimer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Achebe, and several others — were, in fact, actively engaged in improving as well as humanizing our understanding of otherwise forgotten or unknown histories and geographies. They have been; but, I think, that job is an adjunct to their main business as artists, artists whose role is, as Gordimer says, to *enact*, render, embody human life, and only secondarily to deal directly with the ideas, analyses, values, and declarations out of which intellectuals make their work. I would go so far as to say that the artistic imagination at some very profound level actually *resists* abstract ideas and arguments: it is consumed, rather, with the need to express itself in figures and configurations that inhabit a different sphere than that of abstract discourse and clashing ideas. Both artists and intellectuals confront "the terrible ambiguity of an immediate experience," but whereas the intellectual tries to mute the ambiguity and highlight its prosaic meaning, the artistic imagination must, I believe, somehow preserve its irreducible complexity with immediacy and metaphor.

So whether the artistic imagination resists or facilitates intellectual and political understanding of the complicated global situation we are in today is not the main point of the aesthetic work itself. Hence, yet again, the need for a clear intellectual articulation of the political and moral issues that stand beyond, just beyond reach of, the aesthetic work, issues which the work very often engages on its own terrain. For if we are to allow the work of art the kind of autonomy it requires — despite the hybridization of forms, the influence of mass media, including film, and the ubiquity of political discourse even in the work itself — we cannot expect artists on their own to do more than they can. Now, I am not happy with dividing artistic from intellectual energies so neatly, nor do I believe that they finally act independently of each other, since, as Antonio Gramsci says at the very beginning of his notes on the intellectual, everyone with an intellect is an intellectual. But he does go on salutarily to add that not everyone has the *function* of an intellectual. It is this function that I now want to discuss as working at the outer limits of the work of art, although, of course, I have no wish to suggest either that the aesthetic has no political or social relevance,

or that the intellectual work has no component of the artistic imagination in it. I am making the distinction here mostly to highlight the separate social and political status of intellectuals, their discourse, and their mode of being: it should be kept in mind that in my view, however, the secular intellectual and the artistic imagination exist in a *complementary* relationship. Both are *performances* that are essential to an era of globalization and rapid, often bewildering, change.

### III. The Reason of the Intellectual

Intellectuals and ideas about intellectuals have never been so much in evidence as during the twentieth century. In the last few years alone, we have had such various and attention-getting accounts of intellectual life, considered as something distinct from other sorts of life, as (to name a small handful) Irving Howe's autobiography; the massive biography of Hannah Arendt by Elizabeth Bruehl-Young; William Barret's revisionist memoir of the early *Partisan Review* intellectuals; Simone de Beauvoir's recollections of her last years with Sartre; Russell Jacoby's book; and Carol Brightman's biography of Mary McCarthy. Right across the political spectrum, from radical to conservative, there has also been a series of studies of the intellectual in modern life, from Noam Chomsky's pioneering series, beginning with *American Power and the New Mandarins* and climaxing with *Towards a New Cold War*, *Manufacturing Consent*, *Necessary Illusions*, and *Deterring Democracy*, and Alvin Gouldner's *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*, to, in the supposedly value-free social science center of the controversy, the work of such people as Edward Shils, Peter Berger, Raymond Aron, and others, all of them following in the tradition of Karl Mannheim, himself a depoliticized follower of Lukács and Max Weber. On the rightward side, there have been innumerable essays and books by and about conservatives and neoconservatives, from policy-makers like Zbigniew Brzezinski to academics and quasi-academics like Daniel Bell, Robert Nisbet, Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz (whose assertion that he and George Orwell are fundamentally the same may strike us as a little quaint, not to say inappropriate), Paul Hollander, Peter Steinfels, and many others.

Most of this work, on the right, left, and center, is indebted to the extraordinary cultural ferment early in this century that came out of trying to make sense of the relationship tying the activities of mind to the activities of society. Stuart Hughes's book *Consciousness and Society*<sup>14</sup> lays out the fundamental questions and sketches the careers of major European thinkers who entered the arena, and Lionel Trilling's *Mind in the Modern World*<sup>15</sup> brings those earlier reflections autumnally and mournfully up to date. One thinks here inevitably of the crystallizations of thought and positions precipitated in the nineteenth century by the Dreyfus Affair, just as the Sacco-Vanzetti, Alger Hiss, and Rosenberg cases played a similar role for U.S. intellectuals up to the middle of this century. One thinks also of such towering protagonists as Antonio Gramsci — to whom I shall return in a little while — György Lukács, and Theodor Adorno, for all of whom the intellectual was the very center of political analysis and, in Gramsci's case, of action. Then we must, in addition, recognize the importance not only of Karl Mannheim and Max Weber, but of Julien Benda, whose *La Trahison des Clercs*, published in 1927, defined the notion of an intellectual vocation with a force and a conviction that, as I shall try to demonstrate, is still powerfully resonating and intellectually compelling.<sup>16</sup>

If, in addition, we mention such European names as Orwell, Silone, Merleau-Ponty, Koestler, and Sartre, and if we think of such debates, *causes célèbres*, and issues as the battle over Stalinism, the question of anticommunism, anti-anticommunism, McCarthyism, the status of liberalism, and the whole matter of loyalty and the questions connected to it of recantation or of informing as investigated by Victor Navasky, we will, I think, begin to have an idea of how vast and how dense is the field occupied by intellectuals and by intellectual debate all over the world as subjects of activities intrinsically important as well as distinct from other topics of social or political concern.

Now it would be perfectly possible to argue that the entire history of the nineteenth-century West can be understood in one very crucial way as deriving from the gradually increasing role of the intellectual in society, and that this began to be both evident and compelling in the case of the Enlightenment philosophers, the legacy of whose ideas and careers thereafter informs revolutionary as well as counterrevolutionary cultures, states,

and associations. Of course, the way in which the intellectuals' role was enhanced and increased in influence was far from simple. A great many developments occurred during the nineteenth century to transform the intellectual from being someone who, in Lewis Coser's phrase, was a man or woman of ideas to becoming such disparate things as (according to Marx) an ideologist, (according to Arnold) a man of culture, (according to Humboldt) a humanist, and (according to Nietzsche) a teacher and philologist. Intellectuals become associated or affiliated with administration, with bureaucracies, with colonial rule, with universities, and even with the church (Newman) during the nineteenth century, in ways that were unthinkable during, say, Voltaire's age. James Joll's book *Three Intellectuals in Politics*<sup>17</sup> takes the intellectual squarely into politics with its account of Léon Blum, Walther Rathenau, and Marinetti; despite its elegance and insight, however, one wishes for some acknowledgment beyond habitual Eurocentrism that non-European intellectuals—Fanon, Shariati, C. L. R. James, Kanafani—played even more impressive roles. They, like Tagore, Iqbal, Yeats, Neruda, Césaire, and Faiz (to name only a handful), play a crucial role in the culture of nationalism and the foundation of the postcolonial nation-state.

In addition, the formation of different kinds of intellectuals during the nineteenth century varies tremendously from country to country. The Russian intelligentsia, as portrayed so memorably by Turgenev and Dostoyevsky, was different in its interests and activities from that group of Victorian English sages that includes Mill and Ruskin, and, of course, as Madame de Staël was one of the first to recognize, a wide gap separated German scholars and thinkers from their French and Swiss counterparts.

In the twentieth century, these national and cultural differences are on the whole much more dramatic, especially if we expand our interest—as we must, I think—to include intellectuals in the non-European world, as well as those who live in exile between two or more worlds, as cosmopolitans or expatriates. To compare two works that are almost exactly contemporary with each other, Abdullah Laroui's *Crisis of the Arab Intellectuals* and Alvin Gouldner's study of the new Western intellectuals, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*,<sup>18</sup> is to real-

ize the enormous disparity between activities and concerns that in both instances are called intellectual. For Laroui, the Arab intellectual is centrally concerned with the reinterpretation of tradition and of inherited classical culture (*al-turath*); and this revisionist work is, says Laroui, conducted against a background of Western domination of the Arab world, a reinvigoration of Islamic values, and the crisis of identity engendered by such things as dependence, neocolonialism, Orientalism, and a new self-image. For Gouldner, the intellectual is a member of a rising class whose hegemony over the old monied and propertied class is practically assured. In Gouldner's postindustrial world, intellectual production has replaced industrial production, as, indeed, Fritz Machlup's studies — which show that more than 60 percent of the GNP today is furnished by knowledge-related production — seem to bear up.

If we add to these contrasting styles the role of African intellectuals in postcolonial African societies, or of Chinese intellectuals in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square, or of Latin American intellectuals concerned by the dynamic of democracy, dependence, and independence, we have a much more exact notion of how generalizations about the intellectual's or humanist's role in modern society tend to be tenuous and fairly crude, even though there is now a worldwide phenomenon of intellectuals. For even *within* particular cultural formations, the conceptions of the intellectual mission are widely divergent.

What is worth noting, however, is that many intellectual debates took place (and, in the non-European world, continue to take place) in conjunction with efforts by literary artists to understand the history and dynamics of their societies. Yeats, for example, is only partially understood as a poet; his poetic *oeuvre* is fully engaged in the debates about Irish politics, the Irish language, and the future of Ireland that make up the great cultural revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And this, in turn, presages the founding of the Irish state and the republican movement.

Nothing, however, is quite as disturbing and yet inevitable as ranks of intellectuals arrayed against each other in the service of nationalisms, creeds, states, parties, or causes at war with opposing nationalisms, creeds, states, parties, and causes. Such

conflicts are a fact of cultural life since cultures plus intellectuals became self-conscious of themselves and of each other. But, as Benda correctly remarks, never before the nineteenth century had the wholesale participation of intellectuals in these conflicts been so great. The conscriptive powers of the state and, in our own country, of the corporation and the party are enormous, as are, of course, the resources of the contemporary media as those have been characterized by scholars like Herbert Schiller and Armand Mattelart. Given those realities, it is not so surprising to find intellectuals so deeply and lucratively involved in what Benda calls the organization of collective passions; although with Benda, I am strongly inclined to deplore this involvement and that sort of intellectual performance during periods such as the Gulf War. This is, alas, routinely the case during wartime, as Carol Gruber's depressing *Mars and Minerva*, a study of American intellectuals during World War I, reveals in detail.<sup>19</sup> As for the use of intellectuals in such occupations as spying, intelligence gathering, and psychological warfare, there, too, we find a wide spread of opinion and performances, some thinkers stressing the necessity (perhaps only the illusion) of intellectual aloofness, others the intellectual's unquestioning loyalty to the national or nationalist cultural cause.

But perhaps this rapid survey of a little history and some peculiarly intellectual dilemmas is enough for now. Let me go on to isolate a few things in all this that strike me as having special relevance to the role of the secular intellectual in a globalized cultural setting. I should say at the outset that I do not plan to present a universal theory of how intellectuals behave, of how in a Kantian sense they ought to behave, or of what general role they play in different societies and histories. What I want to concentrate on is a series of questions, all of them in some way leading us back to Benda's *La Trahison des Clercs*, originally published in 1928 and republished after World War II (1955), in order to take account of intellectual behavior under, as well as after, fascism.

I will not try to summarize Benda here, much less to assess the book systematically. What I want to do is to recall the fact that Benda's book put to intellectuals a very uncompromising challenge, one that can, in fact, be put also to the artistic imagination, although it is the intellectuals' role to engage directly



with the challenge. As intellectuals, he said, as people whose interests are not determined by profit or mundane transitory effect, you should devote yourselves to transcendental, transnational virtue, as did Jesus, Socrates, Voltaire, or Renan. Can you do so, or are you, like most of your company, condemned to the organization of political hatred whose logical end, Benda says with startling severity, is nothing less than the organized slaughter of nations and classes?

Everyone who reads Benda and who does not immediately dismiss him as either too provincial or too absolute—for Benda seems uninterested in or untouched by the role of ideology in determining values, and he seems totally oblivious of anything other than Europe and European values—surely comes away with a feeling of mixed confusion and disquiet. At least this is his continuing effect on me, even though it is quite easy to find other writers, like Gramsci, for example, in whose work the characterization of intellectuals is far more subtle than Benda's. Benda's effect at bottom is to stimulate in us the whole problem of what it means—and how difficult it is—to be a real intellectual, a problem that is not central to the artistic imagination at work. When he says that the intellectual must uphold a given set of unchanging values, he is saying that the intellectual's vocation is accomplished not only by identifying and referring to those values, but by sticking to them no matter how many practical punishments and rewards are likely to result. The oppression of human beings, thus, is not only believed to be unjust; it must always be declared unjust, even though a national or patriotic mood makes such a declaration tantamount to treason. To disguise oppression by saying that it is not occurring, or to say that as a professional Milton or Shakespeare scholar, or a poet or novelist, it is not my concern, or simply to be expediently silent about it: these are betrayals of the intellectual vocation that Benda finds equally dishonorable and equally unacceptable.

As I stated earlier, Benda is too provincial, too absolute, and too confident to be taken literally. Moreover, he doesn't at all discuss the problem of how intellectuals possessed of the right values and sense of mission can make their force as intellectuals felt; he seems unconcerned by the problems of effectiveness, of instrumentality of coherence, persuasion, or rhetoric. He is no help at all when it comes to what we liberals like to call a com-

plex situation, a phrase, by the way, that too often is a rhetorical signal given before a lie is to be pronounced, or when a grave and immoral complicity with injustice is about to be covered up. But Benda's strength is obviously that he seems to know and feel what intellectuals should do and what they should stand for, whereas those of us — like myself — who find him stodgy, inflexible, and not skeptical enough are immediately set adrift in a sea of questions and doubts that cannot easily be resolved. Then you start to realize how very insidiously Benda's argument in *La Trahison des Clercs* preempts and, in a sense, defines the uneven and inconsistent terrain for anyone attempting to understand the intellectual's role. For if we say that Benda is too obsessed with consistency of values and performance, we must also be prepared to say *which* sorts of inconsistency *are* acceptable, which are not, and by what standards. What is an allowable discrepancy between, for example, an abhorrence of human violence and the patriotic imperative to rally round the flag in a time of national need in which war is being advocated?

Benda, in short, stimulates a large number of questions, particularly for those of us who profess humanism and historically based scholarship, as well as artists who are members of national groups and cultures. I do not think that these questions can be deflected by saying that, in a strict sociological sense, they ought only to concern moral philosophers, political activists, and religious teachers. While it is true that different audiences demand different articulations, and that to write novels is not the same as writing pamphlets, every one of us — artists not least — has an intellectual consciousness, a moral sense, a civil role to play. Therefore, we should try to see what happens if we take Benda's tract seriously, and we ought to begin by asking the kinds of questions pertinent to our own social, intellectual, and historical situation. Because one wishes to be a dedicated poet, or academic scholar, or doctor or lawyer, is it enough to consider one's responsibility as an intellectual *outside* the academy or profession or the field of art thereby taken care of? My contention here is that an understanding of the history and politics of one's own time, and one's role in both as an intellectual, is a necessary first step toward being a critical, engaged intellectual, not someone who just does one job. It is this relationship, then, between the public role of the intellectual

and the intellectual's professional or disciplinary role, even if that role is that of artist, that is sustained by what I'd like to call an intellectual vocation.

There is first the question of secular power: what is and what ought to be the intellectual's relationship to the essentially conservative power of the state, the party, the corporation? What is the relationship between the intellectual and social change? Second, what does it mean to be consistent as an intellectual, that is, to avoid the betrayal of which Benda speaks? Lastly, what is or ought to be the intellectual's capacity for or attitude toward the truth? Is there truth, or, so far as the intellectual in society is concerned, is the truth always relative, ideological, or constituted by narrowly defined interests?

One of the most striking things about the archive of modern experience is the extent to which the pursuit of scholarship and knowledge is bound up with things that we do not commonly admit are associated with knowledge or truth, such things as power, the state, and money. This would not be so dramatic a revelation for anyone who had read Marx, Nietzsche, or Freud in an uncompromising way. The trouble is that for most humanists, the professional guild inculcates an opposite belief, the dogma that because the life of scholarship, for example, is carried out with protestations about humanism, objectivity, and taste, it therefore follows that knowledge is free of what we might call social affiliations and worldly circumstances. The same argument is made about art, that it has nothing to do with politics. These are comforting, not to say flattering, beliefs to hold on to, but are quite easily dissipated when looked at more closely. Certainly the history of Western scholarship about exotic places and peoples is extraordinarily tied up with such things as religious ideology, with the conquest of territory, with colonial trade, with the subjugation of people and the administration of territories. This is still the case today in so-called area studies programs, as well as social science and humanistic curricula in the universities, yet very few people, and certainly not enough intellectuals, are willing to consider, much less look critically at, the effect of powerful interests upon the production of knowledge and upon what Habermas calls interest-constituted knowledge, intellectual activity carried on under the aegis of considerable state, ideological, and corporate pressure.

One of the broader and, in my mind, most interesting questions I confronted in studying the institutional way in which the Orient was perceived in Europe and the United States over the past two centuries is the constitutive role of power in determining knowledge. Early modern scholars like William Jones and Silvestre de Sacy might have been able to do their work in spite of the two great empires that they served, respectively, but their work certainly would have been far less impressive if, for example, England did not administer India and if France did not house manuscripts brought there by colonial officers. A generation later, by the middle of the nineteenth century, university researchers of Sanskrit or of Persian poetry existed all across Europe—how could they be said to be made possible by European imperialism? Part of the answer is that we cannot know what these scholars would have done if there were no empires to provide them with resources; the other part of the answer is that knowledge production is always influenced, or constituted and sustained by, interests, and interests run the full gamut from actual possession to imaginative or fantasized appropriation.

Thus, if we were to compare European scholarship about the Orient with, say, Islamic scholarship about Europe during the same period, we would discover how in the first case European scholars were more wide-ranging, more patient, more detailed and detached from their subject matter because they could afford to be, since their culture was in a position of relative strength. Whereas in the second case, Muslims would be defensive and anxious, studying Europe for what they could learn about its perceived strength and technological modernity, which was invading and threatening their societies. And these attitudes, European and non-European in turn, define the position of the intellectual, who, because Europe was so powerful relative to the Orient, assumed more various and differentiated roles — professor, administrator, scholar, essayist, traveler, memoirist, novelist — whereas in the Orient, especially in the Arab world, their counterparts were almost always either direct servants of power or translators, interpreting the West for the benefit of the ruler, and then helping the ruler — both secular and religious — to decide how to defend against the West or to adapt some of its ways very selectively.

The point here is perhaps the obvious one, that no one in a society can be isolated from power and the institutions, discourses, and individuals who represent power; certainly I think a very wide range of analysts agree on this point, including Marx, Arnold, Gramsci, Foucault, C. Wright Mills, and many others. The thing that I find puzzling is that so many humanistic intellectuals today—the people described by a recent Trilateral Commission study, *The Crisis of Democracy*,<sup>20</sup> as traditional intellectuals (those concerned with values), as opposed to policy or technocratic intellectuals (those concerned with decision-making)—insistently and hectoringly distance themselves from precisely those things that make possible their existence as functioning intellectuals, namely the corporations, the government, the managerial class, and the whole apparatus of cultural production, from the journalist to the ticket seller and impresario, thereby pretending that they are objective.

In any event, whatever goes on inside such intellectual professions as humanistic studies, it is true to say that the overall picture in most modern societies is very much under the influence of specialization and the guild consciousness. This is certainly a globalized phenomenon not limited to the Western world. Peter Nettl characterizes the situation as follows:

Why is the intellectual increasingly being pushed from the battlefield and being put to flight? . . . As bureaucratic modernity advances, the intellectual retreats. For one thing, universality is no longer regarded as a validation of intellectual status but as an arrogant and unjustifiable claim, at best the stigma of the dilettante. In a world of growing specialization too wide-ranging interests may be an amiable eccentricity but no longer qualify him to speak with authority. Instead, respect and competence come not from universal, Aristotelian wisdom but rather from detailed knowledge and technical qualifications. The right to speak with authority is no longer inherent but has become an external attribute which is attached to a person like abbreviated titles of degrees after a name . . . Since one cannot know everything, intellectuals who do wish to speak with authority on the wide range of social phenomena must increasingly go in for a severe form of reductionism. Hence we find that today's intellectuals increasingly concentrate on what they hold to be the one dominant aspect of life . . . But reductionism is only one rather

feeble response to modern complexity—one, moreover, that carries less and less conviction as a form of explanation or prediction. The intellectual is being winked out of the crevasses of his social and political concerns. Politics—the arena *par excellence* of dashing ideas and normative conflict—is itself becoming a specialized business with its own professional qualifications . . . persuasion has little part in [the type of politics implicit in the notion of the rational-scientific society] except as a means of teasing resources out of the invisible men in government. And this type of persuasion, the political scientists keep telling us, is no amateur business of “mere” convictions nowadays but a highly skilled technical affair of lobbying and fixing. Problems of right and wrong in politics are much less relevant, at least in the actual political process . . . Modern American political life is thus divided into rather unequal halves; the power processes of organized pressure, policy, and action, and the individual’s inalienable right to express an opinion. Societies which imprison people for their opinions at least do them the service of ascribing influence to such opinions which seems almost flattering by comparison!<sup>21</sup>

Unlike Nettl, however, Foucault thinks that the specialized intellectual is potentially not a marginal creature, but someone who exists at the intersection of various interests and powers, and can therefore be effective as an agent of social change. I am not convinced by this argument. Specialists tend to become more specialized, the rewards—say for expertise in one or another area of foreign relations, of humanistic scholarship, or social policy, or for that matter for writing novels or literary essays—become more attainable and definite, the impulse to be interested in change is consequently diminished. Gramsci’s distinction between organic and traditional intellectuals strikes me as more valid, and a more accurate way of understanding the present situation. Organic intellectuals are directly associated with a class; they organize its interests, create fields of consensus and acceptability, and they make it prevail. A brilliant analysis of this last function is to be found in the work that Herbert Schiller produced in, as well as after, *The Mind Managers*,<sup>22</sup> which is an account of the way the media produces visions of reality permitting manipulation and social control unique to the great industrial democracies like the United States.

Gramsci's other class of intellectual is the traditional intellectual, that individual who fulfills unchanging functions such as those of a teacher, priest, or bureaucrat. Traditional intellectuals are not less affiliated with classes and interests than are organic intellectuals; it is just that the traditional intellectual holds on to territory already conquered, whereas the organic intellectual is opening up new territory usually in connection with an ascendant class or movement.

These distinctions are, in the final analysis, analytic distinctions, since in practice the organic intellectual of one generation becomes the traditional intellectual of another. Consider Arnold. When he wrote *Culture and Anarchy* in 1868, he was writing against a background of agitation for the second Reform Act, of the Hyde Park Riots, and of Irish unrest.<sup>23</sup> His tract, then, was an aggressive assertion of middle-class values in which the task of making culture and the will of God, i.e., the State, prevail against the working class was to be undertaken by the men of culture, i.e., disaffected middle-class social aliens like himself. He wrote as an organic intellectual of a possessing and ascendant class. Subsequently, however, he has been read as a traditional intellectual, and *Culture and Anarchy* is regarded and analyzed as a document praising the virtues of humanistic education, or scholarship and literacy. Culture for Arnold had been a practical instrument for quelling civil unrest and extending hegemony by consent and rational persuasion. In time it became the possession of a guild sustaining itself in a particular way, in a particular situation, with a particular discourse of its own.

Gramsci's distinction between organic and traditional intellectuals is much better known than another distinction he makes in a letter written from prison in 1931:

17 August 1931:

It seemed to me that I and Umberto Cosmo, and many other intellectuals at this time [say the first fifteen years of the century] occupied a certain common ground: we were all to some degree part of the movement of moral and intellectual reform which in Italy stemmed from Benedetto Croce, and whose first premise was that modern man can and should live without the help of religion, positivist religion, mythological religion, or whatever brand one cares to name. This point appears to me even today to

be the major contribution made to international culture by modern Italian intellectuals, and it seems to me a civil conquest that must not be lost.<sup>24</sup>

Although Gramsci does not name this class of Croce-inspired intellectuals, he clearly has in mind what we might call secular intellectuals whose moment in Weber's terminology was "the disenchantment of the world," people who accept no reductionist scheme of things, thinkers for whom the closures and comforts of revealed truths were unacceptable, individuals whose weapons were essentially criticism and humanistic rationalism as opposed to dogmatic authority and unquestioning assent. Vico is a model for Gramsci as he puts forward this notion of the intellectual. The secular critical intellectual is clearly an oppositional figure within civil society, as the phrase "civil conquest" in Gramsci's letter seems to indicate, that is, an intellectual whose efforts are expended in opposition to the traditional institutions that dominate civil society. Thus, borrowing from Raymond Williams, we can go on to say that the secular intellectual performs an alternative activity in society, given that the modern realities of mass societies in the developed, and postcolonial, world are so dominant in their regulating power vis-à-vis the individual that they occupy the place formerly held by ecclesiastical authority and revelation. Yet, Williams says,

However dominant a social system may be, the very meaning of its domination involves a limitation or selection of the activities it covers, so that by definition it cannot exhaust all social experience, which therefore always potentially contains space for alternative acts and alternative intentions which are not yet articulated as a social institution or even project.<sup>25</sup>

The secular and critical intellectual therefore exists in order to articulate those alternative acts and intentions in a society whose collective national identity exists to coerce, rule, and control in small matters as well as large a practice that tends to reduce and mystify consciousness into depoliticized acceptance, placidity, and passivity.

A book by Joan Cocks, *The Oppositional Imagination: Feminism, Critique, and Political Theory*, develops these ideas of Williams



and others into a full-fledged theory of intellectual resistance to the dominant order.<sup>26</sup> Gramsci's "pessimism of the intellect" is found by Cocks to be one of the sources of opposition to the dominant order; that is, there is always a dominant order and any analysis of that has to posit the extreme difficulty of standing outside it, changing it, perhaps even finally defeating it. The difference, however, between my generation and Gramsci's is that for us now in the United States there appears to be only the system variously celebrated as free-market, free-trade capitalism, or, in Joseph Nye's more sanguine philosophy, as keeping America number one and bound to lead. Despite the apocalyptic triumphalism of "the end of history," it is perfectly obvious that the problems of race, gender, class, and economic inequality persist domestically and on a world scale. Few oppositional intellectuals today—and I include such formidably capable figures as Chomsky—are possessed of a total alternative vision to the current state of affairs. We are left with fairly specific sites of oppositional activity—the written intervention and lecture platform, the alternative media, the environmental movement, some churches, informal networks, oppositional groups—where we might hope to mount a resistance to such catastrophes as imperialist war, pervasive ideological racism, ecological defacements, and abuses. Deterrent power is hardly there (witness the absence of any effective mass resistance to the Gulf War, with its media-manufactured consensus) and organization nonexistent.

#### **IV. The Intellectual Vocation**

Beyond the general situation I have sketched, one needs to analyze particular relationships between intellectuals and power in specific social, historical, and political configurations; what is relevant to an American intellectual during the nineties, for example, is not relevant for an Arab or Japanese intellectual during the same period. But I do think one always-present element is the question of complicity or collaboration, which I have ventured to formulate as the secular intellectual's vocation: to provide a critical alternative to the prevailing orthodoxy, which always exists and is always in a position of dominance. In the formerly colonized world, the return of nativism and religion is a particular threat to secular life, especially in the part of the

globe I know best, the Arab world. Yet, I think, there is a central distinction to be drawn between media and even "expert" attacks on official "enemies" like Islamic fundamentalism or terrorism, crude and ultimately self-serving labels, and the often impressive internal debate about Islam within Islamic societies, a debate concerning women's issues, secularism, democratic freedom, and tradition. Little of this is reported in the West, but it takes place and complicates, perhaps even improves, a generally depressing picture.

To return to recantation, which is given one of its most powerful aesthetic forms in Brecht's *Galileo*,<sup>27</sup> one supposes that it is frequently a function of greater age and maturity; what we are for in our youth, those radical passions and political enthusiasms that must surely have inspired each of us, seem destined to be replaced not only by what seems superficially to be a brave disenchantment but also, amongst intellectuals in particular, by a need to advertise the change. One thinks immediately of *The God That Failed*,<sup>28</sup> or, to bring it more up to date, the case of many who felt that U.S. policy in Vietnam or Iran was disastrous, but who now feel that what took place there after U.S. intervention ended is catastrophic, and hence a need sets in to denounce the past, revise values, and reconsider the virtues of U.S. interventionism, as occurred during the Gulf War. But, as E. P. Thompson has argued, there is a great difference between disenchantment and apostasy, for he suggests that "[t]here is a . . . creative . . . tension between a boundless aspiration — for liberty, reason, *égalité*, perfectibility — and a peculiarly harsh and unregenerate reality."<sup>29</sup> Out of that conflict there comes intellectual as well as moral and aesthetic creativity; their sources are the same. But to turn against aspiration and denounce oneself is, Thompson continues, "self-bowdlerization . . . an imaginative failure because it involves forgetting — or manipulating improperly — the authenticity of experience: a mutilation of the writer's own previous existential being."<sup>30</sup> If as secular intellectuals we cannot condone anything that warps the spirit, punishes the body, or destroys the community, then we cannot turn away from these values simply because they no longer seem expedient, because situations seemed to have changed, and, most important of all, because we are accommodating to the status quo. As Hazlitt put it in his essay "On Consistency of Opinion," "[One] need not . . .

pass an act of attainder on all his thoughts, hopes, wishes, from youth upwards, to offer them at the shrine of matured servility; he need not become one vile antithesis, a living and ignominious satire on himself."<sup>31</sup>

The last of Benda's challenges is the question of truth. Put as simply and clearly as I can put it, it is to ask whether secular intellectuals can or ought to uphold a unitary standard of morality and truth. We need to concede at the outset that mere silence or a deferral of opinion on a given question is unacceptable, that the secular intellectual as I have been describing him or her is committed to the articulation of alternatives, and that professional competence or artistic license is not the issue when it comes to those matters which Benda avers are the intellectuals' domain, questions of values, of justice, of truth.

There is a dramatic moment in the encounter between Foucault and Chomsky on Dutch television in 1972, where their positions are so diametrically opposed as to be irreconcilable. Chomsky says that as an intellectual he is moved to struggle because of a belief, however implicit and difficult to define with precision, in the possibility of justice; Chomsky solicits the help of what C. S. Peirce calls abduction, the use of all the empirical or experiential data available as a spur to imaginative projection beyond the data. Foucault says that all ideas of justice are functions of a situation, and what may seem like an absolute idea of justice "is an idea which in effect has been invented and put to work in different types of societies as an instrument of a certain political and economic power or as a weapon against that power. But it seems to me that, in any case, the notion of justice itself functions within a society of classes as a claim made by the oppressed class and as justification for it."<sup>32</sup>

I shall not try to draw out the differences further, nor will I suggest why I think that Chomsky's is more a tenable and interesting position. I am, however, interested in remarking on the rhetoric of justice—for example, in Michael Walzer's book *Just and Unjust Wars*,<sup>33</sup> which serves in reality to certify as just those instances of war with which the author happens to be in sympathy. What we have in such cases is the intellectual reproducing a system of values—reproducing it in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of the word—while claiming to be doing the opposite. The contamination of much intellectual discourse with the silent repro-

duction of unquestioned values associated with the status quo — most of it in the name not only of neoconservatism but of decent liberalism — has turned a large segment of the intelligentsia into therapists for the state and for power in our societies.

I think that we must conceive of the secular intellectual not as an authority — a fixed personality magisterially pronouncing truths in recognized accents — but as an everlasting effort, an unendingly vigilant, prompt, energetic, and reflective activity, an unstoppable energy. *There is no given freedom*, Sartre says, which is to say that it must be won, in general and in detail. No area, no person, no value is automatically privileged, none spared the scrutiny of intellectual examination. As for freedom here, it is, as I implied earlier, relative to the absolute and totalizing impingements of systems, bureaucracies, organized passions, corporations, nations, and tribe-consensuses.

In sum, then, the secular intellectual cannot be defined, his or her activities prescribed, his or her place fixed. We are dealing instead with a constant activity, which to fix with definitions and nomenclatures is to destroy precisely what gives it value. On behalf of what, and in whose interests? There are no simple answers because, in keeping with Sartre's reminder that eternal values are fleshless, those very things to be struggled for by secular intellectuals can be defined and discovered only in the act of surmounting obstacles and overcoming resistance in specifically concrete zones, contested sites, issues. Certainly one can posit minimal goals to be kept in mind, abuses to be condemned; when we say "freedom" we mean the minimum of coercion, freedom of thought and expression, the possibility of community, the absence of violence against individuals or ethnic, religious, and national minorities, crimes of state terror and nationalist complicity and/or silence. But for the intellectual these things are either instigations to action, or final goals to be achieved: they do not tell us enough how a secular intellectual *is* when in action.

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I shall propose six overlapping and intersecting axes of activity and thought for secular intellectuals, and these, I believe, pro-

vide the substance and the life of an intellectual vocation. They by no means exhaust, however, what it is, that such intellectuals are and do; rather, they provide a complex and uneven terrain in which intellectual work can be situated and contextualized, as well as reflected upon. Underlying these axes are two assumptions: one, that the intellectual exists to provide alternative acts and intentions in an age when the state and mass organizations aspire to domination on a level increasing, rather than diminishing, with time; and two, that the intellectual's oppositional activity begins, but does not end with, his or her immediate social location. The impingements of guilds, ethnicity, nation, and even race have provided intellectuals with what can only be called a structure of apologetic compromise, the essence of which is to excuse abuses at home (or in your camp) for which you are responsible, in the interests of attacks on a consensus enemy, or praises for a consensus friend. There can be no compromise for the intellectual on fundamental matters of principle. Of these matters, the most important by far is testifying to the truth about organized state violence—violence against individuals, classes, subject populations—especially when such violence is totally hidden by the rhetoric of denouncing an approved enemy.

Thus, these six axes are also to be understood and interpreted as orienting intellectual activity toward the realization of an ethical and—given the fact that the intellectual deals primarily in language—a rhetorical goal. That is, the goal of testifying truthfully and without compromise in concretely analyzed and contextualized situations. Let me immediately and schematically, then, put forward these six axes one after the other, although together they make up a cycle. Each of them generates a particular function in the intellectual; all of them intensify self-consciousness and self-reflection; all of them fortify and depend upon each other.

(1) In an age of proliferating informational resources and control, the management and manipulation of these resources usually results in the misrepresentation, distortion, or effacement of the human (or inhuman) agency and interests at work. There exists, therefore, a need for providing counterinformation—information, that is, that runs counter to and is often hidden by the prevailing consensus, information whose description and

analysis is based on the privilege of human agency and responsible choice. Thus, the intellectual fulfills an *archival* function, and to do so must, in Foucault's fine phrase, exercise "a relentless erudition."<sup>34</sup>

(2) Styles of writing tied to particular classes, groups, and corporate guilds inevitably also produce special languages, jargons, or specialized idioms. These specialized languages with their routinized distancing or alienating codes cannot be dismissed; they can, however, be learned and, subsequently, translated into a language that is closer to common sense. Requiring analysis and the mastering of detail, for the intellectual this is the *interpretive* or, more accurately, the *re-interpretive* function.

(3) On the level of both detail and generality, the tendency of the age is to grasp issues in functional, pragmatic, or realistic terms. Not only does this obscure the role of interest, perspective, and agency, but it also reduces the likelihood that consequences and ends, human or inhuman, as well as ideals, values, and principles, will be graspable. Certainly, for example, discussions of war and peace, human rights, and national conflict have generally been carried on in such a way as if all that mattered were ethnocentrically defined "U.S. interests," or, on a less exalted level, as if the most important thing was not to be "controversial." Therefore, the intellectual's role is to demystify by articulating the basic issues of justice and human good or evil surrounding these issues, which, where potential or actual violence is concerned, never emerge, but knowledge of which is essential for understanding. This is an *epistemological* function.

(4) Specialization of language derives from specialization of skills, knowledge, and conceptions of activity. These in turn breed an ethic for one's own field of eminent domain, for others an ethic of noninterference. In areas like medicine and politics, the results have often been unfortunate; in the humanities, the results have been no less unfortunate, if also less visible so far as society is concerned. The intellectual's function here is *dramatic*: to interfere and intervene across lines of specialization.

(5) The operations of consensus give rise either to outright domination or, the other side of the same coin, trivialization. As Adorno says,

The feigning of a true politics here and now, the freezing of historical relations which nowhere seem ready to melt, oblige the mind to go where it need not degrade itself. Today every phenomenon of culture, even if a model of integrity, is liable to be suffocated in the cultivation of kitsch. Yet paradoxically in the same epoch it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics.<sup>35</sup>

At such a juncture, in the formulation of alternative intentions and nontrivial modes of practice, including the aesthetic, the intellectual's function is an *insurgent* one, to provide resistance.

(6) Finally, since Plato and Socrates, the problem of responsibility and what has come to be called practical problem solving has beset the intellectual. Loyalty, the common good, justice, and truth attract the policymaker, party member, or loyalist; repel the true artist or scholar; and extract a uniquely intellectual fudging trait, also called trimming, from the intelligentsia. Benda's contribution to this problem is, I believe, difficult to circumvent. The intellectual's task, he says, is not to agree, consolidate, or help along, but, rather, eccentrically and crucially to press distant claims, argue for principle where the prevailing climate counsels expediency, to show the irreconcilability or discrepancy underlying most human encounters. If we find Benda difficult to accept when he asserts that intellectuals deal in absolutes, we can modify his argument instead that intellectual effort bears testimony to discrepancy as an *absolute* form of human intercourse. Expressions of solidarity or conscience under difficult circumstances are, of course, forms of discrepancy. Thus, irreconcilable, irreducible oppositions — between ideas, peoples, societies, histories, and claims — come to grating performance in the intellectual's work. This is the intellectual's *moral* function.

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## Notes

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